

White House Conference on Aging Solutions Forum on Civic Engagement: From Awareness to Action

September 30, 2005

Thank you for allowing the Volunteer Center of North Texas to present at this prestigious conference. I'm Mary Beth Harrington, Director of Agency Relations and I'm speaking on behalf of our Executive Director, Julie Thomas, who could not be here today.

I have a presentation that I give fairly often at volunteer recognition ceremonies that talks about baby boomers as well as what Tom Brokaw has termed, the Greatest Generation and the difference in the two groups. Prior to the baby boomers, most volunteers were more traditional in that they volunteered on a consistent basis at a set number of agencies and often did this for many years. For instance, we have one gentleman who recently retired from volunteering at the Volunteer Center after doing so for 23 years. Every Wednesday afternoon, we knew we could count on Mr. Stein.

But, as we all are aware, baby boomers are not retiring in mass at 65; in fact many continue to work for years after that. Others choose to spend time caring for their grandchildren, and some choose to travel or engage in other leisurely activities. Volunteering or at least traditional volunteering does not fit into their lifestyle but this reality does not come as a surprise to volunteer centers. Volunteer centers have been on the cutting edge of recognizing that the baby boomer generation does not fit into that traditional volunteer mode and have been diligently working to enhance the capacity building of nonprofits to deal with this diverse population.

To accomplish this, volunteer centers have developed a two-fold approach. First, we have started to educate the non-profit community on how to develop volunteer opportunities that will be attractive to this group. This is accomplished through a series of volunteer management trainings. Training is key. Baby boomers have been taught from an early age to want it all and they want that even in their volunteering. They want volunteering that is easy, flexible, worthwhile and most of all, they do not want to get tied down. They are also unforgiving, if you waste their time, talent or treasure, they are gone. So for many traditional nonprofits this is a challenge, but not insurmountable. For instance, at the Volunteer Center of North Texas we have helped our local Meals on Wheels and Big Brothers and Big Sisters to adapt their programs to fit baby boomers. Now both agencies have volunteer opportunities that can be done episodically, that is they have one-time or short-term volunteer opportunities.

This can also happen through a new program that is revolutionizing volunteering in the US called the Hands On Network model. The Hands On Network model

provides volunteers an easy, flexible avenue for volunteering at a number of different agencies. VCNT has recently incorporated this model into our programs and started with a pilot project this summer. Kelly Nugent is a baby boomer volunteer and was our project coordinator for our Hunger Doesn't Take a Holiday volunteer campaign we launched this summer. Kelly recruited 20 volunteers from her friends and colleagues to pick blueberries to provide to homeless shelters. The volunteer's ranged in age from 3 to 75 and even two weeks afterwards, we had volunteers contacting us about when we were going to pick again. It was easy, flexible, they saw the impact and they did not have to make a long commitment. Many volunteer centers, like VCNT, are incorporating this model into their programs.

The second, approach volunteer centers are taking is to go to the front lines and educate the community of the breadth of volunteer opportunities that exist. At VCNT, we do not have 25 volunteer jobs to talk about, we have 50,000! Many volunteers assume that if you do not fit into a specific mold, that you cannot help so we are out in the field at schools, community organizations, faith-based organizations challenging volunteers to find ways to engage in volunteering that effectively utilizes their unique skills. For instance, when I was volunteer coordinator at the Dallas Public Library, I had a man reupholster the furniture at one of our branch locations because that was his hobby.

Baby boomers want to volunteer, they are just not sure how. Thankfully, there are volunteer centers throughout the country that have been in this business for years and have the knowledge and resources to meet these needs. Unfortunately, though like many nonprofits there have been some volunteer centers that have had to close their doors. In Texas alone, in the last seven years we have gone from having 23 volunteer centers to 17 while the populations in all our communities have been escalating.

While, these statistics are sobering, in Texas, we are encouraged that the One Star Foundation has begun to understand the integral part volunteer centers play in our communities and has started to develop approaches to support volunteer centers. The need for this was especially evident recently with Hurricane Katrina and Rita. At the Volunteer Center of North Texas, our role in the event of a disaster is to coordinate the spontaneous volunteers so that first responders like the Red Cross can focus on the victims. By the time the first bus from the gulf coast rolled into Dallas, we already had 4000 volunteers registered and now, four weeks later we have over 8,000 registered and over 7,000 have been referred to agencies helping in the disaster effort. When a disaster the magnitude of Katrina and even Rita strikes, it does not affect just one community but the entire state and in Texas, the One Star Foundation is the key to providing the mechanism to allow volunteer centers across the state to communicate. For instance, VCNT just learned through the One State Foundation that the volunteer center in Tyler, some 90 miles away, was in need of volunteers and we are getting the word out to our 8,000 disaster volunteers since some of them would be willing to help.

As I have said before, baby boomers do want to volunteer and are actively seeking volunteer opportunities. The popularity of shows like ABC's Extreme Makeover proves that but communicating to them how to go about volunteering is challenging since nonprofits are constantly dealing with funding constraints. By working with volunteer centers throughout the country to develop a single message campaign, we could generate an army of volunteers. Whether they were at Woodstock or not, baby boomers see themselves as flower-children who can change the world. Picture a media campaign that shows a vintage baby boomer from the 60's with the message, *"remember when you wanted to save the world, well you still can"* followed with information from the local volunteer center. A single message like that would drive baby boomers to volunteer centers where they could learn about what opportunities are available throughout their community at all the agencies not just one. The Volunteer Center of North Texas alone supports over 2,000 nonprofit agencies. We like to call ourselves a one-stop shop for volunteering. So by working directly with volunteer centers, your support has a multiplying impact. You don't just help one agency.

In conclusion, I hope I have demonstrated to you the way in which volunteer centers are already focused on engaging older Americans in volunteerism. My policy suggestion to you is to support volunteer centers. We have the tools and resources in place now and have already begun the work. Unlike other agencies that have multiple constituencies and missions, most volunteer centers have a single mission and purpose that revolves around matching volunteers with agencies. A single message campaign as well as congressional support would give volunteer centers the ability to keep their doors open to volunteers everywhere.

Thanks you.